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Book Reviews

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Review of *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, edited by Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent (Polity)

David Zeglen

ABSTRACT Foucault & Neoliberalism modestly argues that Foucault's project, particularly after May 1968, bore striking similarities with neoliberalism. Although scholars have debated this issue since at least the French publication of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault & Neoliberalism shows that, since the English publication of the same lecture series in the inauspicious year of 2008, the American university has increasingly deracinated Foucault from his French context and thereby misread his attitude toward neoliberalism. Thus Foucault & Neoliberalism, an English translation of Zamora's previous anthology in French, *Critiquer Foucault*, seeks to revive the debate—and has done so in the pages of *Jacobin* magazine thus far—by situating Foucault back into his proper historical milieu.

Foucault and Neoliberalism, by Zamora, D., and Behrent, M.C., (editors) Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016, \$16.95, 152 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5095-0177-9

Since the Great Financial Crisis and Trump's election last November, the Anglo-American Left's increasing sectarianism over identity politics versus exploitation has reached a fever pitch, evoking the divisive "Marx versus Foucault" debate that haunts cultural studies. Daniel Zamora and Michael C. Behrent's edited collection *Foucault & Neoliberalism* traces this homology between the academy and the Left public sphere back to the birth of French neoliberalism via a reckoning of Michel Foucault's public politics and academic works in the last two decades of his life.

Wisely sidestepping the banal question of whether or not Foucault was a neoliberal, *Foucault & Neoliberalism* more modestly argues that Foucault's project, particularly after May 1968, bore striking similarities with neoliberalism. Although scholars have debated this issue since at least the French publication of *The Birth of Biopolitics*, *Foucault & Neoliberalism* shows that, since the English publication of the same lecture series in the inauspicious year of 2008, the American university has increasingly deracinated Foucault from his French context and thereby misread his attitude toward neoliberalism. Thus *Foucault & Neoliberalism*, an English translation of Zamora's previous anthology in French, *Critiquer Foucault*, seeks to revive the debate—and has done so in the pages of *Jacobin* magazine thus far—by situating Foucault back into his proper historical milieu.

To accomplish this, *Foucault & Neoliberalism* deploys two methods. First, given the vigorous debates over interpretations of his Collège de France lectures, several contributors contextualize Foucault's work by examining his public positions and intellectual affinities during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As Zamora, Behrent, and Mitchell Dean's chapters illustrate, Foucault publicly supported policies that were also championed by the godfathers of neoliberalism—Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek, and Gary Becker—such as a negative income tax, opposition to universal healthcare, and social

security. As Dean demonstrates with a revealing passage in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, while Foucault was critical of figures like Becker, he also believed that neoliberal solutions to social issues provided the best alternative form of power for the protection of individual freedom because neoliberalism did not seek to subjectify, only to incentivize.

Foucault's policy positions are also situated within a larger epistemic zeitgeist in French intellectual society after the economic crisis of the early 1970s led to the ascent of neoliberal thinking. Michael Scott Christofferson reads Foucault's support of the increasingly popular "new philosophers" and his close association with the rising Second Left as a sign that the dominant terrain of political struggle in France had shifted from overcoming class-based exploitation to supporting the individual rights of society's excluded. Within this historical context, Christofferson argues *The Birth of Biopolitics* should be understood as Foucault's attempt to think through a new type of governmentality beyond sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical power, one that draws upon free market solutions that regulate people the least and respect individual difference. As Dean states, "like many intellectuals of his period and later, [Foucault] would look into the liberal and neoliberal repertoire to find ways of renovating social-democratic or socialist politics and escaping its perceived fatal statism" (100).

Second, *Foucault & Neoliberalism's* contributors interrogate Foucault's own theoretical positions to elucidate their compatibility with neoliberal ideas. For instance, Christofferson points out that Foucault's crude one-sided theorization of modern state power helped him generate a chain of equivalence between the USSR, Nazi Germany, and Western Europe. As a result, Foucault's work contains a broad anti-statism that lends itself to Hayekian arguments about the inherent totalitarianism of the state. Behrent also argues that Foucault's deep-seated philosophical anti-humanism positioned him to be receptive to neoliberalism due to his emphasis on the market as a power that limits power itself. Finally, Amselle points out that the neoliberal mantra of "personal responsibility" strongly resembles Foucault's shift to "ethical self-concern" in his final lectures, with the attendant consequences. As Amselle elaborates, Foucault's "ethical self-concern...can be seen as [an] extremely conservative techniqu[e] for psychological maintenance, in the sense that they refer individual expression or grievances back to individuals themselves, thus averting any condemnation of the society in which they live" (165). Some may dispute that many of the above claims, when analyzed individually, do not necessarily lead to a neoliberal politics, and that many of these points indicate a broad liberal sympathy and vague anti-statism. However, when all the claims are taken together, *Foucault & Neoliberalism* forcefully elucidates a picture of Foucault who was intellectually experimenting with a wide swath of ideas that shared a common political logic.

Indeed, one of the more fascinating aspects of *Foucault & Neoliberalism* is its teasing out of some of the intellectual consequences of uncritically using Foucault's late work to theorize a politics of the Left. As Zamora argues, Foucault's restricted focus on social exclusion and the redistribution of power independent of economic exploitation limits an analysis of the historical and material conditions that produce, and are produced by, structural inequalities thereby contributing to the reproduction of neoliberalism. Amselle also asserts that the Foucauldian obsession with defending individual difference leads to a postmodern politics involving the demand for zones of absolute autonomy that respect individual difference rather than the overthrow of the neoliberal ruling classes and the revolutionary seizure of state power. In effect, *Foucault & Neoliberalism* alludes to how critical social theory has succumbed to the Foucault fetish—the intellectual shift Foucault represents that obfuscates political economy—and thereby lost one of cultural studies' main methodological commitments: conceptualizing culture in relation to the social totality.

Although these asides are more assumed than backed up by evidence in the volume, readers familiar with American cultural studies will no doubt recognize that the field, since at least the 1990s, is in fact closely tied with a postmodern politics of identity that has found a comfortable compatibility with neoliberalism. Indeed, it isn't much of a stretch to suggest that several colleges across America have interpellated their students as neoliberal subjects versed in the respect of difference.

However, *Foucault & Neoliberalism* does not argue that Foucault's work should be rejected *tout court* simply because uncritical invocations can help legitimize, rather than analyze, neoliberalism. While the volume frequently critiques Foucault's propensity to mistake appearance for essence, two of the volume's standout contributions also build theories from his work that incorporate the ideological and the material to better understand the neoliberal conjuncture. Observing that like Foucault, governmentality studies treats the self-image of neoliberalism as reality, Jan Rehmann argues that there are concrete disciplinary practices in the workplace that obfuscate neoliberalism's hierarchical realities. Rehmann suggests that governmentality studies integrate critical ideology theory within their analysis of management textbooks to help emphasize how the material and the symbolic function together under neoliberal governmentality. While agreeing with some of Foucault's arguments about disciplinary power, Loïc Wacquant points out that Foucault's theoretical gaps about the modern prison also stem from his overreliance on abstract models of penal reform rather than concrete practices. To correct this, Wacquant puts Foucault in dialogue with Bourdieu's concept of the bureaucratic field to illuminate how neoliberal penalty involves a state apparatus that monopolizes the legitimate use of material and symbolic violence. Thus, contrary to some critiques about the volume, *Foucault & Neoliberalism* is not insisting that scholars throw Foucault out with the bath water.

Although *Foucault & Neoliberalism* makes a series of fascinating claims, some of the volume's arguments sometimes rest on questionable evidence. For instance, Dean quotes Francois Ewald, one of Foucault's former students, from an interview Ewald conducted with Gary Becker, to bolster the argument that Foucault sympathized with neoliberalism. However, in the same interview, Ewald also claims that he is only offering his own neoliberal reading of Foucault, and that Foucault would offer a different view if he were there himself. Furthermore, in response to Dean's chapter in the volume, Ewald has publicly stated that he is astonished that Foucault could ever be identified with liberalism and neoliberalism. Thus Dean assumes an unmediated transmission of interpretation from teacher to student, much as Foucault had done when he saw a direct link from Marx to Stalin. Likewise, Christofferson argues that Foucault in part endorsed Glucksmann's book because the former was obsessed with maintaining his celebrity status. Although an interesting claim, Christofferson makes no effort to elaborate on this, nor is it clear how it is germane to the overall argument of his chapter, or the volume.

However, these minor deficiencies do not significantly detract from the provocative, well-researched, and necessary intervention that the volume represents. *Foucault & Neoliberalism* can rightly take its place as an original contribution to the litany of critiques of Foucault, and hopefully act as a lighthouse to future scholars of cultural studies who decide to study neoliberalism.



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David Zeglen is a PhD candidate in the Cultural Studies program at George Mason University. For his dissertation, he is researching the applicability of

Trotsky's concept of uneven and combined development as a theory of cultural globalization. He is currently co-editing a special issue of *Celebrity Studies* with Neil Ewen on right-wing populist celebrity politicians in Europe due out in 2019. He is also working on an article about the rise of Cultural Marxism as an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory in the United States.



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